



This collection of short stories is dedicated to all seniors who continue living, growing, and embracing each phase that life brings.

To those approaching seniorhood, it offers succour; a reminder that the journey ahead holds potential adventures, and wisdom too.

These stories are often testament to the resilience that seniors embody. May they inspire more seniors to embrace the challenges and the joys that seniorhood offers.



Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>Embracing the Rainbows of Seniorhood</i>	<i>xi</i>
Accident Or Suicide?	1
Will Pipli Recall?	11
The Yellow Kurta	16
The Pink Sari	29
Que Sera Sera	38
Meow!	43
Echoes of the Soul	47
Kaushalya's Story	84
Fortune Hunters	93

Kashmir Trilogy	98
Food On The Table	113
Does Age Matter?	117
A New Dimension, Perhaps?	137
Musings: Through My Bedroom Window	139

Acknowledgements

Life teaches tough lessons; the longer it goes, the tougher they become. No guide maps exist, so we learn as we go along.

I nod in acknowledgement to Life and the invaluable teachings it's bestowed on me.

Another nod goes to all those who inspired these varied stories.

A special nod of gratitude to Ms Renu Kaul Verma and her incredible Vitasta team. Their unwavering support and hard work has brought this book to your hands. I am indebted to Ms Verma for the opportunity to be a part of her wonderful team once more.

Embracing the Rainbows of Seniorhood

Isn't it truly wonderful that seniors are finally stepping forward to claim their rightful place under the literary sun? After enriching life's tapestry with accumulated wisdom and experience, they are now moving forward to make their voices heard and stories celebrated.

This anthology is a testament to the courage, resilience, and the vibrancy of life seniors strive to grasp.

With its myriad twists and turns, Life presents them with innumerable rainbows. Each colour represents a unique opportunity to explore, learn, and grow. This anthology invites you to witness a rich tapestry of seniors from different walks of life, in varying arenas and circumstances—a testament to the enduring power of the human spirit.

It brings together a diverse cast of characters. Their stories reflect the kaleidoscope of experiences that seniorhood entails—their challenges, joys, heartaches and triumphs; vibrant hues that seniors bring to the literary landscape, with brilliant brushstrokes on the Canvas of Life.

Accident Or Suicide?

A happy sun danced its way through the room. Two men descended into the open dining room in a house as whimsical as its owner, with a series of small steps going up into the kitchen and to the upstairs bedrooms, and some going down into the basement.

‘I need a break,’ declared Sarita rebelliously, trotting in and out of the kitchen. The heady fragrance of both juice and filter coffee filled the air as did the sounds of toasts popping up and eggs being poached.

‘Why?’ demanded her hubby, Shiva sharply.

‘Why not? Can’t I take a holiday by myself?’

‘Sarita, you’ve had a long holiday at home for a month, all work at a standstill, mourning your *bahu*. You still need a break? What about your son? His wife committed suicide. Yet he’s been to work every single day thereafter.’

Son Sujit's fingers drummed the table.

'So? Must everyone be in step all the time?' He was treading on dangerous ground.

'You had your break when we went for the immersion. I came just to keep you safe from that deadly current. Did you know that?'

'Wish she'd carried me off!' she muttered.

'Who?' This last came with an accompanying frown.

'Ganga.'

'Who's that?'

'The river, stupid,' Sarita replied, exasperated. 'Better she grab and stifle me than live with idiots.'

'Okay, mom where are you going?'

'In search of sanity in spite of a madman and his son.'

She marched off upstairs. Father and son exchanged worried glances. Then Shiva headed for their bedroom.

Sarita was packing. Catching his baffled look, she exclaimed, 'Make yourself useful instead of standing there, simply gaping. Check out train timings.'

'North, south, east or west? And why train?'

'Better company than travelling with people with their noses up in the air.'

'Why are you going, think of Sujit. He has no one to turn to, when I go to work.'

'Then don't go to work. Be with him.'

'But he goes to work.' He sounded helpless...but wasn't really.

‘Then?’ she asked, giving him a meaningful glance.

He tried to pull her into his arms with a pleading smile.

‘Why go?’

Her threatening look was her only response.

‘WHY? Why do anything? In meetings all day! After hours, and before hours, you’re on the phone, setting up meetings, dictating to your subordinates and stenos for your presentations. You are travelling for meetings all the time. Your son too. She did too. That’s why, they had no kids.’

Suddenly she pounced on him, shaking him by his shoulders, shouting angrily, ‘We all do these things. Tell me why?’ His eyes widened at her sudden display of fury, his head bent down, his breathing shaky. He was unable to tell her the simple answer:

‘Because that’s how I like it.’

Everyone usually followed his lead: read only motivational books, never fiction; watch sports only on TV; spend weekends spreading ‘the good word’, which was his occupation, as he travelled to ‘spread light’—never mind the neighbour’s diyas lighting up your home at Diwali; abroad too, they travelled to ‘spread light’ while scrimping and saving on pennies while on a foreign ‘holiday.’ Wouldn’t it have been better, instead, just to relax at home?

Seeing realisation hit home, she added, ‘Now, can I plan my break? No board meetings, no community

meetings, no internet. I just want to do nothing, except pampering my soul, maybe?’

He began to sulk. He left the room with a flourish, ordering his son to book her ticket to wherever she wanted to go. Neither father nor son bothered about when Sarita left, or from where, whether she was going to the airport or station. Neither asked; they just lived on at home and went to their respective workplaces, with stoic expressions on their faces.

Day 3

Scraping off the burnt bits off his toast, Shiva said, ‘Pick up that damn phone and call your mother, Sujit. Where is she? We’ve not heard from her, even once.’

‘Where do I call her?’

‘Mobile phone. It’ll ring wherever she is. She packed thermals, so it’s up north somewhere...some rural or village hideout I guess from the amount of money she has drawn from the bank. Why hasn’t she called?’

‘Maybe no internet connection?’

‘Don’t be silly. If Everest can have it, why not some Kumaon mountain resort? Here, let me do it. Where the hell is Sarita holed up? She’s never been out of touch before!’

Her phone remained stubbornly out of the coverage area.

‘Hope she’s not broken a bone trying to trek without first learning the ropes,’ he commented drily.

Two days later, a call came from the hills. Police had found a body in a river and needed to confirm the identity. Was it a suicide or accident? For once, while in between travelling, both father and son cast apprehensive looks at each other.



WHEN SHIVA declined to visit the morgue, Sujit went in to get over with the identification ritual.

‘Pa, we don’t know if it’s Mom.’

‘I can’t look. You go. I’m here.’ His lips in his frozen face, now numb with cold, were trembling. Sujit sat down next to him on the dingy porch, rubbing the cold from his hands.

Later, he walked out hurriedly, his face drained of colour, heaving and retching into a nearby bush.

The details were sketchy. She was in a homestay, and had wandered into the nearby orchard while walking. She must have gone close to the river. No one saw anything. Shiva berated himself dramatically, saying, ‘Attention seeking again?’ Meanwhile, his son thought wryly, wondering why on earth had his mother gone alone and he had allowed her to do so. I should have come with her. Don’t we always do everything together? Why this trip alone? he asked himself. ‘Pa, she came here for a break, probably some rest from you, too,’ Sujit said to his father. ‘Son, soulmates don’t

go off on their own. They make space for each other alongside. What d’you mean, “she needed rest from me?”

‘You’d be talking about some goddamned business scheme and make her follow-up on research leads; she had been doing that all her life.’

Sujit stalked off to mull over his own woes, heading towards a little copse adjoining the cottages, where a tiny stream gurgled its way through the trees. A child gambolled there with her dog. As he drew closer, he heard her sing a familiar ditty. His stride quickened; he was listening attentively to her, now. The little girl withdrew at his approach, running swiftly out of sight with her dog.

Sujit had recognised the melody at once. ‘Mom’s song—should I share this with the old man?’ He decided to let it be, taking a circuitous route back to the homestay. Then he settled down, making conversation with the owners.

Sympathetically, they told him about her morose mood at her arrival, and upon it improving later, when she met her little friend.

‘The one with a doggie?’ he asked. ‘I saw her near the stream.’

‘Yes, it was their favourite place to sing songs and dance together.’

‘Mom dancing? I’ve never seen that!’

‘Oh, she was so graceful in her skirt! We clapped to set the rhythm. So beautiful. She told the child stories and

songs in different languages.’ This was a side of his mother he’d never known. He wondered whether even Pa knew about it. But he refrained from asking him.



AS WORD spread in the village about their arrival from the city, the little one fell silent. Her mother saw apprehension on her small face and snuggled her frightened child, whispering, ‘Tell Mai,’ as she looked tenderly into her troubled eyes and trembling lips.

‘She was like you, Mai. A...a secret between her and me.’

‘Then now that she is not here —I am her. You can tell me.’ Hesitantly her little secret was wormed out: she had given her a book. Relief flooded her face. A book? Maybe it was a book of stories.



FORMALITIES, FUNERAL and final rites had held them up in the rural outpost. Days stretched endlessly. Shiva trekked a lot in different directions, while Sujit kept his ear to the ground, listening to the whispers from their little pal, who constantly nattered and giggled with her dog for company.

The little girl was wary, and sometimes watched, Sujit who would often stop by to listen. One evening, petrified,

she led her mother to the spot under a tree where they dug it up to unearth a book bound in a thick plastic bag. They quickly snatched it out and bundled it under a shawl. They examined it at home. It had another little something, a USB pasted inside the back cover.

Between the pages were beautiful photographs, of the lady and a young woman looking adoringly at her. After much thought, she prised out a picture, folded it carefully beneath her shawl and approached Sujit.

‘Do you know her?’ Sujit’s double take was answer enough.

‘Where did you get this from? Who gave it to you?’ Her upraised hand stalled his questions. She quietly led him to the spot, and she placed the book in his hands. Back beneath the tree, he read what were not stories. Could it be described as one long story of love gone sour, into something in which love had no role? Every success meant more drudgery; habits soon overtook life, and everything was borne quietly for the sake of the son, the husband, in-laws, and society.

What expectations did society have? Parents and society expected his spouse to be a doll who never spoke, cried or wanted sex. They wanted to forsake everything that was precious to her. Numerous tiny incidents would take place daily—incidents that would drill keyholes into her heart, all of which were plugged with ‘What will society say!’

‘I’m used to these prickly feelings that take time to

process; is it always my fault? God, it's so tiring fighting with Shiva; it makes the insides of my stomach curl and do only I have to constantly process pent-up anger resulting from years of unspoken needs never being met? Why do I always have to fight for everything I want?'

Then came solace. Bahuji entered!

There were no dates in the diary, but there were enchanting descriptions of shared togetherness, bypassing their respective spouses. Accounts of leaving work early, practically bunking office to listen to music at home while baking fruit cakes or dancing together to old forgotten songs.

Was this pleasure a sin?

They took time off from lunch breaks to linger in trial rooms, trying on outrageous dresses in red, bright pink and purple, giggling at the thought of reactions at home. In homeware stores, they tried sitting on modern furniture, dreaming of a revamp of their up-and-down home. There was even an account of a session of them flirting in a tearoom with a stranger who was blushing pink at the randy language of two primly dressed women.

Both longed for children, but perish the thought! Their world was too ugly for the children they wished to raise!

Sujit slammed the book shut, gasping for breath, trying to absorb what he'd just read—he was shaken to the core. Mom and his Shonali were deprived of their natural happiness by him and Pa?

They only pretended—*pretended* happiness to not rock the boat? *Spreading the good word in so many places was actually selling lies that they were living!*

Before his mind wandered further, another thought cropped up:

Why did Shonali choose suicide, for no logical reason? Was she so stifled by her life, despite mom's company, but minus his? And what about mom?

Sujit was on the horns of a dilemma: dare he read more, did he want to read more of this truth somewhere else? Were there more unpalatable truths to be read? About Mom-dad's relationship? Will he be able to survive the shock of mom's true feelings, now laid bare?

Then came another new chain of thoughts.... Did these feelings go beyond mother and daughter?

